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Central Kerala Nayar

WOMAN-DAUGHTER

[793] A woman was her daughter's immediate mentor and moral authority throughout her life. Whereas a son entered the company of men and boys after about the age of seven, a daughter returned to her mother's [868] intimate care after the tāli rite. From her mother and from older women of the taravād a girl learned cookery, household and child care, manners, morals, and minor agricultural work. As her daughters came of age a woman took personal pride in their dress, jewelry, and [864] physical attractions. It is said that formerly mothers and other matrilineally related women instructed girls in the arts of love. A woman should spend her life in her mother's household, and she should obey her, taking over from her more and more of the household re- [769] sponsibilities. She should defend her mother in disputes with other women, offer her companionship in old age, and perform funeral and anniversary rites for her soul after her death.

[843] A daughter replaced her mother in the social structure and was expected to resemble her in character, as indeed she often did. A woman's constant care for her daughter's welfare became particularly prominent during the latter's pregnancy and parturition, when the mother must be at hand to offer counsel, good food, and medicines. So long as they respected her and did not encroach on her authority, she should welcome her daughters' husbands with cordiality. If, however, a husband's conduct gravely displeased his mother-in-law, she [606] [586] had the right to ask her daughter to reject him. A dutiful daughter would usually do so; if she refused, the mother might place her case before the kāranavan and request that the husband be dismissed.

Behavior between mother and daughter was usually informal, and they had few secrets from one another. In the privacy of their home and in the absence of men, matrilineally related women of today discuss their affairs and their neighbors freely, sometimes with hilarious [578] mimicry. Mother and daughter were expected to have occasional quarrels. Indeed, there was often a deep undercurrent of rivalry between them which might break out into acrimonious mutual scolding. A daughter should bear patiently her mother's reprimands, but even though she struck her mother in anger her bad conduct would be forgiven more readily than the neglect of a son. A mother would also often try to shield her daughters from anger on the part of the kāranavan, of the mother's own brothers, or even of her sons. Mother and daughters usually maintained unity in disputes with other segments of the taravād, and it was axiomatic that mother and daughters stand united in disputes with other households.

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124 Feeling That I would obtain more detailed information concerning the children from Nani than from Panju or his brother, Narayana, I proposed one day to interrogate her rather than her husbands. After some initial difficulties, the principal one being that men did not like to let her out of their sight, I did, nevertheless, manage to interview her in the yard of the Appayl Wattakkeh household. Even then, I could see that Panju was uneasy about it. I noticed that all the time he was apparently playing with his favourite son, Kumaran, he cast suspicious and displeased glances in our direction, and attempted to overhear what one of the intrepreters was saying. The other volunteered to help, and took to talking with Panju during these interviews, in order to entertain him and keep him occupied elsewhere. But this was never entirely successful and it was obvious that Panju fundamentally disapproved of my speaking to his wife directly instead of through his or Narayana's intermediary.

I have already remarked how much more pleasant and rewarding I had found it to question the women of Kerala rather than their menfolk. Nani was no exception, and she proved to be much more intelligent and willing in her answers than Panju ever was. Perhaps an explanation of her husband's distaste for my speaking directly to her is to be found in this: he vaguely feared that she would tell me things which she "ought not to", and which he confusedly thought wrong to let me have. Narayana was the same, and although he, too, pretended to play with young Sridaran, it was only an excuse, I think, to remain in the courtyard, to watch us and try and overhear what was being said.

862 Nani was still suckling the two year old Raghavan, her last child. I asked her when and how she would wean it, and she answered that she would do so when she would be two months pregnant again. She [298] would then apply *nux vomica* to her breast nipples and the bitter taste would make the child stop wanting her milk. She said that she obtained the product in the bazaar as a pharmaceutical drug, not as a natural product of the country. Some children were not put off by this method, she added, and for Kumaran she had had to put chicken dung on her nipples and tell him what it was that he was about to eat. In other cases, some mothers beat their children till they stop suckling, but Nani did not like to do this, although she knew that others did.

291 Loin cloths were not put on children until they were in their third [855] year. Before that they were allowed to run about naked. In Nani's [864] opinion, they began to realise that there was a difference of sex only when they were five. (This appeared to me to be somewhat in contradiction with the fact that children received their first clothes two years

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earlier, but I give the information here as it was recorded by me at the time from the informant's statement.)

In spite of a child being fed at the breast very late, the habit of sucking a jump or a finger existed in Kerala as much as it does with us. Nani said that mothers did try to stop it, telling the child that it is bad, and threatening punishment should it persist. There were no substitutes given, such as rubber teats, and the habit was the natural derivative of breast suckling. When the children had teeth, they used them freely when feeding, and also pulled and scratched the breast with their hands. Boys and girls behaved similarly in this respect and she could notice no difference due to sex between them.

Diapers made of cotton cloth in which the child was wrapped were used for the first year and a half. Then the baby was taught the rudiments of sanitation and shown where and how to go. The mother was almost exclusively in charge of teaching the child this, but sometimes in exceptional circumstances (when she was in the polluting period of her menses), the father, the one most fond of the children, would take the task upon himself. Should the baby forget itself or disobey what it had been told, it would be beaten with a twig over the buttocks or threatened that it would be carried away by a madman or a cat or a dog.

Children slept together on the same mat on the floor of the house until the age of twelve. Aggression between them was quite marked at an early age, and Nani had already told me how the infants with teeth treated her when feeding. A new-born child caused the development of much jealousy among the elder children and they bit and scratched at this time even more than usual. Sridaran was the worst in this way of the four children she had had, and he was still the most aggressive of them all. He often threatened to drive his mother out onto the road and back to the house from whence she came, and accompanied his threats with kicks. He never dared, however, to say such things to his fathers, and showed a marked preference for Narayana, corresponding in this to what Panju had told me about presumed physiological paternity. He seemed to resent any interference from his elder father, especially when the latter insisted on his going to school. He had been known to refuse point blank to go there.

Raghavan, although very young and quieter now, was pretty bad, too, in the way that he fought, bit and scratched his mother. He was late in walking and talking and had really only just learned to do these things. Madhavan spoke very early, earlier than all of them; at the age of five months, he could already make himself understood with words. Nani

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865 told me that she had had no experience with girls as she had only had boys, but that friends of hers who had had them, said that they are quieter and easier to manage.

864 Boys were much worse when it came to early masturbation. This began at the age of two with them, and they seemed to delight in playing with themselves when sitting in the sand or dust. Nani told her [595] own children that they must not do this, because it would make them sick, and it was always her and not Panju or Narayana who dealt with this matter. She noticed too, that her little boys, when suckling, would sometimes get an erection, whereupon she would beat their fingers away from themselves with a small twig. She had threatened them with castration, too, but she complained that this did not seem to have the slightest effect on them.

155 595 I enquired if Nani had noticed any preference in her boys for herself and any marked animosity and fear for their fathers or one of the fathers, at an early age. I asked her too, if, in other families where there were girls, these did not show a partiality towards their male parents. She replied that it was quite apparent that girls as well as boys preferred the mother to the fathers. As far as she was concerned, she thought that both boys and girls were more drawn to the mother than to the fathers because it was the mother who looked after them from an early age. It was, of course, impossible for me to look more deeply than this into the question of Oedipean inclinations as I had neither the time nor the opportunity to make a proper research into the matter.

864 [595] I was interested to learn that it was Nani who threatened her boys with castration when they masturbated, and neither Panju nor Narayana. What happened in the case of girls in other families, then? Nani said that they were told that they would have their genital organs pinched, and this was sometimes actually done, hard, so as to hurt. Here, I insidiously asked whether the little girls ever felt that they were castrated by comparison to the little boys, but the only effect of my question was to make them all laugh heartily – Panju and Narayana, who were eavesdropping just beyond us in the courtyard, as well.

Upon another day, while persevering in my attempts to find out about the early development of Thandan children living in polyandry, I asked if Nani had noticed a period of calm in which the children ceased masturbating and seemed no longer to take any interest in sexual matters. She took this seriously and replied yes, that she had noticed such a lull. Between the ages of four and thirteen, they were very quiet, with only brief, temporary interruptions. At the end of this time, boys and girls

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were definitely separated from each other, but they were already themselves shy in each other's presence, and tended to keep apart. I was surprised to hear the informant mention so long a period of latency, beginning too so early, but of course, what she said should not be taken too literally, there being a strong possibility that she was either mistaken or that she was giving me the information which she thought I would like to hear. She was also the sole source of what I learned in these matters, and I did not have an opportunity to check up on what I heard with any other woman. Still, I find what she told me to be worth mentioning, because it may be that, after all, children in Kerala do have a relatively longer period of latency than was to be expected in such a community.

I enquired about pre-nuptial sexual relations, but the informants, Nani and Panju, assured me that no such things existed. On the contraty, they said, virginity was very highly praised, not only in a girl but also in a boy. Here again, I have my doubts as to the accuracy of this reply, suspecting a knowledge of European ideals in such matters, especially those of the Victorian era. Since much that is British in India today still reflects this period, this may have influenced them to give me such an answer. It was added, however, that other, higher castes, such as Nayars, had no such prejudices, and because of this I have wondered if the information did not take the form that it did out of a desire to praise Thandans and show them up in a favourable light in comparison with Nayars. It was probably a combination of both that prompted them to take this attitude: they wanted to make out that their caste conformed to European standards in what concerned pre-marital sexual relations and was therefore superior to that of the Nayars, their immediate rivals.

I enquired privately, one day, what was the position adopted in coitus by this community. I was told that, contrary to what happened in higher castes where the man lay below the woman, with Thandans the man was always above. The contrary "was not favourable to the procreation of warriors", a strange remark I thought, considering that it was the Nayars who, in olden days, constituted the martial class. I had already heard about this particular way in which some castes in Malabar were reputed to have sexual intercourse, when I was working with the Todas in the Nilgiris during the summer of 1949. I will be giving an account of it in the chapter about these people.

The only point which my interpreter was willing to concede to the higher castes was that they were less inclined to homosexuality than the